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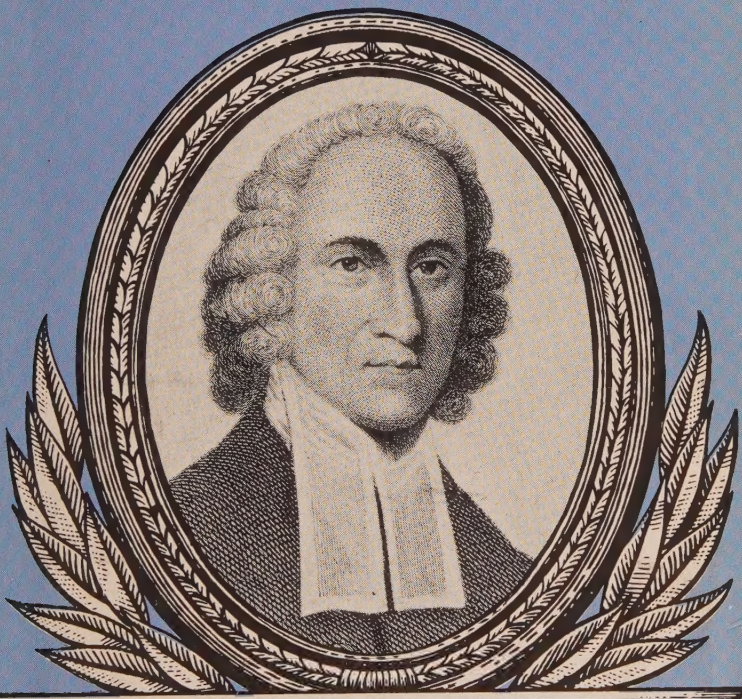

# JONATHAN EDWARDS

## 1703-1758

CHRISTIAN HALL OF FAME SERIES

No. 11

by Ed Reese

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1. Biographies have always been used of God to stimulate more service for Christ. Paul said, "Be ye followers of me as I am also of Christ." Only eternity will reveal how many have gone into Christian service or a deeper walk with God as a result of reading such as David Brainerd's journal.

2. Biographies keep the wonderful ministries of many people alive and fresh before us. Many might soon be forgotten unless their challenging stories are brought to the attention of the Christian world afresh.

3. Biographies introduce people to us whom we might not know, or perhaps have misunderstood. This would be especially true of people now living. In a day when Christians seem to be divided into many "camps", it is hoped that this series will help give all true believers a new appreciation of ministries other than their own.

4. Biographies introduce us to people we will soon be living with for all eternity. The "family of God" is such a wonderful family. If you do not have the assurance that heaven is your home, that your sins have been forgiven, and that Jesus Christ lives in and through your life, please write us. We would like to introduce you to the Saviour, and welcome you to this wonderful eternal family.

ED REESE, Psalm 35:28.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that publisheth peace; . . . . that publisheth salvation; . . ." Isaiah 52:7

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# Jonathan Edwards

**BORN: October 5, 1703** **DIED March 22, 1758**
**East Windsor, Conn.** **Princeton, N.J.**

**LIFE SPAN: 54 years, 5 months, 17 days**

The dream of most preachers is to have the proper balance of knowledge and zeal, brain and brawn, faith and works, head and heart. If there ever was such a preacher it would be Edwards. Many theologians and Bible teachers would strike out in a soul-winning ministry; likewise many that turn others to righteousness could seldom score a point in defending the faith in some tribunal. But Jonathan Edwards' combination of reason and passion causes many to believe America never knew a preacher that excelled in both areas as Edwards did.

His story begins with his heritage. His father, Timothy, was pastor of the local church for 60 years. His mother, Esther, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, pastor at the church in Northampton, Mass., that Edwards would someday pastor. Edwards was born the same year another baby by the name of John Wesley was born in England.

Edwards was the fifth child and only son among eleven children. He grew up in an atmosphere of Puritan piety, affection and learning.

At six he studied Latin. By age seven he had some encounter with God. He had a rigorous schedule of schooling at home. At age nine he composed a brief paper on the nature of souls. His first recorded interest in spiritual things came at ten during a revival at his father's church. He and his playmates built a "prayer booth" in a swamp. Often he and his chums talked to God in the woods. At twelve he wrote about revival like a seasoned saint. He also wrote his famous essay on the spider, which became a pioneer work in the history of American natural science. This essay written shortly before he went to college exhibits his remarkable powers of observation

and analysis. He habitually studied with pen in hand, recording his thoughts in numerous hand sewn notebooks.

He entered Yale University not quite 13 years of age! Before going to Yale he was acquainted with Latin, Greek and Hebrew, having a working knowledge of the same under the tutorship of father and four older sisters. The school was then called Collegiate School of Connecticut. As such, the school had no certain home, and much of Edwards' course was spent in Weathersfield, Conn., but before he graduated, the college had ceased wandering. During his second year in college he read with pleasure Locke's "Essay on the Human Understanding." He graduated valedictorian of his class from the New Haven campus in 1720 receiving his B.D.

He remained at New Haven for two years after this studying divinity subjects. Had he not absorbed himself with theology, he would have become one of the great philosophers of his time. About this time came an incident that gave him assurance about his salvation. He had always thought himself a Christian from childhood days. While meditating one day on I Timothy 1:17 the truth hit him. There came into his soul "a sense of the glory of the Divine Being." He thought, "How excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be if I might enjoy that God...and be as it were swallowed up in Him forever." That's exactly what happened. Prior to this he struggled with God's absolute sovereignty, but now it was "exceedingly pleasant, bright and sweet." He then took an eight month pastorate in New York City in a Presbyterian Church (1722-23). On January 12, 1723 he entered into his diary, "I made salvation the main business of my life." He also made a resolution, "Never to do any manner of things, whether in soul or body, less, but what tends to the glory of God ..." He returned to Yale as a tutor from 1724 to 1726, receiving his M.A. degree in September, 1724. He became a distinguished scholar and a preacher of great ability and his services were sought by several churches. February 15, 1727 he became ordained and joined his grandfather as associate pastor. On July 28, he married Sarah Pierrepont of New

Haven.

The bride was but seventeen but possessed an unusual degree of tact and sweetness of character, and proved a most valuable helpmate to the young minister. Their home life was nearly ideal. Whitefield, while visiting them in 1740 was so impressed that he wrote in glowing terms of their ideal marriage. Eleven children were born to them, eight daughters and three sons. One died in infancy, another, Jerusha, died in 1748 followed by a few months the death of the man she loved—David Brainerd. Edwards had become like a father to the young missionary to the Indians. Another daughter, Esther, married Aaron Burr, the minister (parents of Aaron Burr the political figure). Another son, Jonathan became a great preacher in his own right. The Edwards family tree has produced scores of preachers, university presidents and men of the highest character in many fields. It might be noted that Sarah's father was the pastor in New Haven from 1685 to 1714. When Stoddard died on February 11, 1729 Edwards became the pastor of the most important church in Massachusetts except for Boston. For over 20 years he was to have one of the most reknown and God-blessed pastorates in history. His first published sermon was one given in Boston on July 8, 1731 titled *God Glorified in the Work of Redemption by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of it.* Edwards blamed New England's moral ills on its assumption of religious and moral self-sufficiency. This began his life long fight against rationalism.

Edwards worked hard, spending as much as thirteen hours a day in his study. Northampton was a small city of wealth and culture. At the same time there was a good deal of vulgarity and looseness of life to undermine morals. By 1734 he was openly attacking Arminianism which was becoming popular. Then came a series of sermons in November of 1734 on the theme "Justification By Faith Alone."

At once a half dozen people were converted. One was a young woman, a natural leader among the young people of the town, who had been living a notorious gay and dissipated life.

Edwards had not heard of her conversion until she came to his study, in humble penitance, to converse with him about her soul. As news of the conversion spread through the town, many others, both old and young, acknowledged that God alone could produce so sudden and marked a change in such a life.

This news spread to other towns and numerous revivals broke out in other places throughout New England and continued for several years. A great revival broke out in the winter and spring of 1734-35 during which time there were more than 300 profession of faith. This was about a half of the 620 membership.

As he went about his visitation, Edwards carried a burden for souls and his words fell with the authority of the Holy Spirit upon them. He spoke in a quiet, calm tone, unlike the stormy type, but inspiration and warmth were felt. He recorded some of his accounts during this time in a book called *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God.*(1737) The awakening in 1740-41 throughout the colonies was led by evangelist George Whitefield. However pastors like Gilbert Tennent in New Jersey and Jonathan Edwards in Massachusetts provided the climate for Whitefield's preaching. Edwards surely was the spiritual father of the "first great awakening" for New England is where it started. New England's population was about 300,000 and it is estimated some 60,000 were saved during this period, a half of these being previously unconverted church members. Heavenly power swept from Northampton to 150 towns and cities of the North. For 20 years the revival fires blazed and from them sprang 120 new Congregational churches!

Edwards kept his congregation free from violent emotional reactions as was happening some places. However on several occasions he was right in the middle of such happenings. His sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," first preached at Enfield, Conn., on July 8, 1741 has long been recognized as one of the great sermons of history. During the previous night godly women had prayed for a spiritual visitation. It came.

A special service had been called for by a group of ministers

with Edwards as the speaker for the afternoon session. As the ministers entered the meeting place, they were shocked by the levity of the congregation. They appeared thoughtless and vain and hardly conducted themselves with common decency. As Edwards preached he used no gestures but stood motionless. His left elbow leaned on the pulpit and his left hand held his notes. His text was Deut. 32:35, "Their foot shall slide in due time!" Strong men held on to their seats feeling they were sliding into hell. Men shook, some losing their reason. His words would so grip the audience that they felt, should he cease speaking, the doom he pronounced would immediately come upon them. He flashed before people the fiery prospects of eternal damnation as Hell was a living reality to him. Yet, unlike Whitefield, he did it with calm tones. So vivid was his imagination that he could graphically picture the eternal torments of the lost. The theme of the message was, "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked".

Men and women stood up and rolled on the floor, their cries once drowning out the voice of the preacher. Some are said to have laid hold on the pillars and braces of the church, apparently feeling that at that very moment their feet were sliding, that they were being precipitated into Hell.

Through the night, Enfield was like a beleagured city. In almost every house, men and women could be heard crying out for God to save them. Before it was all over 500 were saved in the community that day. Someone has said about that sermon, "New England might forgive it, but she could never forget it."

The revival spirit continued for years to come, despite much controversy concerning it. Criticism came naturally from high-brow and near-atheistic places. However many Christians criticized the excesses, disorders and civil disruptions associated with the revival. Edwards personally rebuked Whitefield for some of this, but as a whole maintained that it was the work of God to be furthered and purified. He wrote several books defending what God was doing, *The Distinguishing Marks of a*

*Work of the Spirit of God [1741], Thoughts on the Revival [1742],* and *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections[1746],* a book in which he attempted to answer the question, "What is the nature of true religion?"

In the backlash of the revival the people of Northampton were left exhausted and irritable. Edwards was accused of haughtiness, his family of extravagance of dress. In March, 1744, he alienated many of the leading citizens by the way he conducted an investigation into certain activities of their children, who were supposed to have circulated books with indecent speech.

He also attacked the custom of "bundling" where young courting people fully clothed would lie in bed. He charged "It is one of those things that lead and expose to sin." He also called upon the youth to stop attending worldly amusements such as the dance. His popularity began to decline when he began stepping on toes. His position was correct, but perhaps he did not exercise great skill in handling people. For example, from the pulpit he read a list of those who were to meet a church-appointed committee of inquiry, not distinguishing between those who were to appear as witnesses and those who were accused. However the big issue for many years was the "Half-Way Covenant" that Edwards decided was wrong.

Stoddard for many years had instituted a practice of admitting to the Lord's Supper ordinance all who were "in the covenant" even though they knew themselves they were not converted. This meant if your parents or grandparents were "in the faith" you could participate. People then considered themselves as Christians, with the Lord's Supper becoming a saving ordinance. In essence, this was filling the church with unsaved people. Not only the Lord's Supper, but baptism was involved. This covenant allowed baptized parents, to have their own children baptized regardless of whether they or the children were converted. Edward's abhorance of shallow revivalism and emotional excesses caused him to insist that a real conversion meant living a responsible, moral life, hence he began to tighten up his requirement for church membership -

which caused opposition in the Northampton congregation. Edwards simply came to the conclusion that a born-again experience was necessary, not mere doctrinal knowledge or a moral life, in order to have communion. In 1949 he publicly declared these matters insisting on some statement as to conversion and convictions, refusing to administer the Lord's Supper to those not willing to declare their faith or live a Christian life. The church and town rebelled and after a controversy of exceeding bitterness, Edwards was fired on June 22, 1750. On July 1, 1750 he preached his *Farewell Sermon.* Edwards wrote two books defending his position, *Qualifications for Communion[1749]* and *A Reply to Solomon Williams [1752],* who was a pastor at Lebanon, Conn. His position was vindicated later and facilitated the separation of church and state after the Revolution. Years later many of his parishioners wrote him asking for forgivness.

Too formidable a figure for most churches to invite, Edwards, at age 47 with nine children, had to re-evaluate his career. "I am thrown upon the wide ocean of the world and know not what will become of me and my numerous family," he declared. After six unhappy months, in August, 1751 he became the pastor of the frontier church at Stockbridge,Mass., and also began to minister to the Indians there. The work among the Housatonic and Mohican Indians living near by was the result of his appointment by the Boston Board of Indian Affairs to this task. His missionary work reached the Oneidas and Tuscaroras as well.

For eight years the best educated man in the colonies ministered for a salary too low to feed his family. The children pitched in to help by making fans and lace to sell in Boston.

Hampered by language difficulties, illness, Indian wars and conflicts with personal enemies, Edwards nevertheless did his pastoral duties and found time to do some writing. It was here that his future fame as a theologian was born. It seemed God wanted him to have seven years in quiet surroundings devoid of outside attractions to write some of the greatest theological books ever produced in America. It was an intellec-

tual harvest time and history would soon show it.

By late 1751 he was settled with his family in what might be called the "white compound," a village within a village inhabited by twelve white families surrounded by two hundred and fifty Indian families.

The twelve white families mostly were closely related, the half who controlled the town were his personal enemies.

Edwards was the head of the mission, but helpless to direct it against those who considered the town and mission a profitable investment.

In this confused situation, Edwards revealed himself as a first-class executive and administrator. A letter written to Joseph Paine, official of the London Society, set forth the conflict between commercial and religious interest, the waste of public monies, the duplication of effort by rival missionaries, and outlined a plan of centralized effort, with education the main objective.

Gradually, he won the confidence of the Indians. He preached mostly old sermons in English, but his pastoral services were appreciated by the Indians, in spite of his poor command of the Mohawk and Housatunnuck languages.

Edwards also won the confidence of the Commissioners—not so much, perhaps, because of interest in his missionary labors as because of their intense awareness of the necessity for having the Indians on the right side, or at least quiet, in the looming French and Indian War.

The war broke out in 1754. The warlike Mohawks decamped. Mission work came almost to a standstill for three years. A fort was built around the Edwards house. Here, when several whites were murdered near by in the fall of 1754, came town residents and settlers from the countryside for refuge. Edwards served hundreds of meals, and provided pasturage for many horses.

In spite of the fact that hostile Indians were outside the settlement and that the loyalty of the few Christian Housatunnuck Indians who remained inside was always in question, many visitors on horseback still visited the Edwards house.

People who would carry letters were always coming and going.

Daughter Sarah married Elisha Parsons in June of 1750; in November of the same year Mary married Timothy Dwight of Northampton. Esther married Aaron Burr, President of the College of New Jersey, which was to become Princeton the summer after the family's removal from Northampton. In 1756 she returned to visit her parents, carrying her infant son Aaron. And Jonathan and Sarah had a baby of their own in the house—Pierrepont, their youngest and last child, born in April of 1750, in Northampton.

Although the war continued, there were no local Indian uprisings except for one in 1756. Meanwhile, in addition to his teaching and administrative work, and with interruptions due to illness, Edwards found time for writing.

By late 1757 Stockbridge was relatively quiet. The Indians who remained at the mission were accepting Edwards' ministrations.

Edwards had a home and several hundred acres of land. Timothy, born in 1738, graduated from college. Sarah, his oldest daughter, who married Elihu Parsons, lived near by with her children. Jonathan, Elizabeth and Pierrepont, his youngest children, were with him.

Edwards had made a new home, a new career.

One of the secrets of his success was that he always thought through his subject matter. Even on walks and while riding horseback through the woods, he would jot down items and pin them to his coat. When he returned to the parsonage, he wrote out the fuller explanation of the bits noted on the scraps. It is said that at times the whole of his coat front would sometimes be covered with bits and pieces of paper!

His most famous work was *The Freedom of the Will* written in 1754, in which he attacked a self-determining will. It is a defense of the doctrines of foreordination, original sin, and eternal punishment, and is a masterpiece of philosophical reasoning. By 1757 he had finished his *Original Sin* which was

published in 1758. This was a reply to John Taylor of Norwich, England who had attacked Calvinism. Two other books of importance were published after his death, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* and *Nature of True Virtue*. Also important are *A Divine and Supernatural Light Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God*, and *Five Discourses on Justification by Faith*. The American Tract Society distributed approximately one million copies of Edwards' various writings before it ceased to list them among its publications in 1829.

On September 26, 1757 came the call to accept the presidency of Princeton College (later University). The school had been in existence since 1746 and Aaron Burr, his son-in-law, had been the second president till death took the young educator. Edwards theological writings as well as his leadership in the great revival had attracted such attention that he was considered the nation's leading authority on theology and similar subjects. He arrived there on January 4, 1758 and was inaugerated on February 16th. A smallpox epidemic broke out and he took the preventive measure of being inoculated which usually was very mild, but a secondary fever came and he took a turn for the worse and died five weeks into his office. He actually cooperated in this experiment. He was buried in the college cemetery.

Edwards was probably the greatest theologian America has ever produced. His influence for Bible Christianity was tremendous, both in the intellectual leadership and also from the inspiration from his burning heart.

His voice and manner did not lend themselves readily to pulpit oratory, but his clear, logical, and intense presentation of the truth produced a profound and permanent effect upon his hearers. His gestures were few and the voice was not commanding, but his weighty thought and fervid utterance more than made up for natural abilities. He wrote what were considered the most important philosophical treatises of his time. His place among the thinkers of the world is high and indisputable.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The scores of sources used in obtaining data for this series are too numerous to mention, but the following is a list of some of those most frequently consulted.

**Back issues of the following periodicals:**

CHRISTIAN LIFE
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DECISION
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**Books**

Who's Who in America
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Last Words of Saints and Sinners (H. Lockyer) . . . . Kregel Publications
A Treasury of Sermon Illustrations (Charles Wallis) . . . . . Abingdon
An Encyclopedia of Religion (Vergilius Ferm) . . Philosophical Library
Handbook of the Bible (Donald Demaray) . . . . . Cowman Publishing
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Men of Fire (Walter R. Bowie) . . . . . Harper and Row
10 Famous Evangelists, Missionaries, Singers (Series) . . . (Basil Miller) Zondervan
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward Reese graduated from the Moody Bible Institute in 1950. His varied background has included Youth for Christ ministries, service as a pastor, evangelist, musician (Cordovox recording artist), and missionary (Japan and Brazil). He now serves on the faculty of Hyles-Anderson College. He has also served as a researcher and writer for Church League of America as well as a field representative for Second Coming, Inc. He is the founder and head of Fundamental Publishers.

Reese Religious Research provides information and reports on most phases of Christian knowledge. It began many years ago by collecting information on Christian personalities. A library including over 200 biographical volumes and thousands of back issues of Christian publications soon became a workshop. Hundreds of questionnaires were sent out and returned from living Christian leaders to assist in this particular series of concise and accurate biographies.

# DEDICATION

To the many workers for Christ whose faithfulness and dedication are known only to God . . . who will write the last chapter to all biographies. – Matthew 25:21.

# THANKS

To Harold Henniger for sharing The Christian Hall of Fame title, and to Margaret, my wife, for designing, editing and typing.



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